

Conflict-intelligent leadership in a messy, anxious world: Development and validation of a multidimensional assessment of leaders' conflict capacities

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the absence of a validated measurement instrument for conflict-intelligent leadership (CIQ-L), defined as a leader's capacity to engage with and transform conflicts across multiple levels — self, social, situational, structural, and systemic. The authors argue that CIQ-L constitutes a multilevel meta-competency grounded in a dynamical-systems model (AESOPR), and that its measurement is essential for leadership assessment, training design, and organizational theory. Across two studies (N = 810), using exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and longitudinal predictive validity testing, the authors develop and validate an 18-item CIQ-L scale yielding three empirically derived factors: Stabilizing Presence, Contextual-Strategic Alignment, and Conflict-Positive Framing. These factors diverged from the theoretically proposed six-dimensional AESOPR model. Predictive validity was established for Psychological Safety ($R^2 = 0.41$), Leader-Member Exchange ($R^2 = 0.50$), Work Engagement ($R^2 = 0.08$), and Job Satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.13$). Convergent validity was demonstrated through significant correlations with Cultural Intelligence, Adaptive Leadership, and Transformational Leadership, while discriminant validity was supported by a negative correlation with Abusive Leadership. The authors position CIQ-L as a practically applicable diagnostic and developmental tool for cultivating conflict-positive organizational cultures.

Key Insights

1. The empirically derived three-factor structure (Stabilizing Presence, Contextual-Strategic Alignment, Conflict-Positive Framing) diverged from the theoretically proposed six-dimensional AESOPR model, suggesting employees perceive their leaders' conflict behaviors in broader, consolidated patterns rather than discrete theoretical constructs.
2. Bifactor analysis indicated that a single general CIQ-L factor accounts for 83.71% of total variance (ECV), with an Omega Hierarchical of 0.92, supporting use of a total composite score rather than individual subscale scores for interpretation.
3. CIQ-L demonstrated the strongest predictive relationship with Leader-Member Exchange ($R^2 = 0.50$) and Psychological Safety ($R^2 = 0.41$) one week later, suggesting that conflict-intelligent behaviors are closely tied to relationship quality and team climate more than to individual engagement or satisfaction outcomes.

Practical Takeaways

- Organizations deploying the 18-item CIQ-L scale in leadership assessment contexts — including 360-degree feedback or coaching programs — are directed by the authors to use the total composite score rather than subscale scores, given the bifactor findings, while still referencing subscale items for developmental profiling.
- The three dimensions identified in the scale (Stabilizing Presence, Contextual-Strategic Alignment, Conflict-Positive Framing) map to distinct behavioral areas — emotional regulation under pressure, systemic conflict diagnosis, and reframing conflict constructively — which the authors associate with differentiated training and coaching interventions.

Frameworks Mentioned

360-Degree Review — Referenced as a potential deployment context for the CIQ-L scale in leadership assessment and development programs.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The study employs a rigorous multi-phase development process including three pilot studies, EFA/CFA separation across subsamples, bifactor modeling, longitudinal predictive validity, and both convergent and discriminant validity testing across two independent samples. The use of Prolific rather than MTurk is acknowledged as improving data quality. Item generation transparency — distinguishing human-written, AI-generated, and hybrid items — adds methodological clarity. **Limitations:** All data derive exclusively from employee self-reports collected via an online panel, with no leader self-ratings or behavioral observations, limiting ecological validity. The one-week Time 1 to Time 2 interval for predictive validity is brief and may inflate common method variance effects. The authors acknowledge that correlations with Adaptive Leadership ($r = 0.82$) and Transformational Leadership ($r = 0.82$) are high, raising questions about discriminant validity that the article does not fully resolve. The samples, while demographically diverse, are drawn from Prolific and may not represent complex organizational hierarchies. The six-dimensional AESOPR theoretical model was not empirically confirmed, and the gap between the theoretical model and the empirically derived three-factor structure is noted but not fully explained. The one-week lag between data collection points is insufficient to establish long-term predictive validity. **Potential bias:** The senior author (Coleman) is a primary architect of the CIQ-L theoretical framework being validated, which represents an inherent author-construct alignment that reviewers and users of the scale should note.

Organizational Practice

The article describes a scale development and validation process grounded in employee perceptions of supervisory behavior during workplace conflict. Across two studies conducted via online survey platform (Prolific), full-time employees rated their direct managers on observable conflict-related behaviors across a 5-point frequency scale. The research design incorporated longitudinal data collection (one-week interval) for predictive validity and cross-sectional data for convergent and discriminant validity. The article also describes the practical deployment of the resulting CIQ-L scale in organizational contexts including 360-degree feedback processes, executive coaching, and leadership development curriculum design, with subscale items used to identify specific developmental areas for individual leaders.

Strategic Implications

The validation of a psychometrically sound instrument for measuring conflict-intelligent leadership suggests an emerging formalization of conflict competency as a distinct, assessable dimension of leadership effectiveness — separate from established constructs such as Transformational or Adaptive Leadership. The strong predictive relationships observed between CIQ-L and Psychological Safety and Leader-Member Exchange indicate that conflict engagement behaviors may be a relevant input variable in PMS frameworks assessing team climate and relational quality. The bifactor finding — that a general CIQ-L score is more appropriate than subscale scores — has implications for how organizations structure behavioral competency models, potentially favoring holistic conflict capacity ratings over granular sub-dimension scoring. The incorporation of AI-generated items in scale development, combined with expert review, reflects a methodological trend with potential implications for how organizations design and update behavioral competency instruments at scale.

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